

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 239 517

FL 014 218

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TITLE Why a Calligraphy Course for Language Students.
PUB DATE Nov 83
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (San Francisco, CA, November 24-26, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Appreciation; *Chinese; College Students; Cultural Enrichment; Higher Education; *Manuscript Writing (Handlettering); *Second Language Instruction; *Student Attitudes; Surveys

ABSTRACT

There is a variety of reasons calligraphy should be taught to students of Chinese. It is pleasurable; it will help students learn to write Chinese characters better, through dexterity and confidence; it will help students learn to read better, especially when dealing with a variety of forms of cursive writing. Furthermore, it is an essential element of the complex communication in Chinese; it is as integral a part of Chinese culture as history or literature; the quality of one's handwriting carries much esteem in China; and students learn stroke count, stroke order, significance of strokes, character composition, etymology, and artistic balance through this study. These benefits are reflected in the attitudes of students and faculty in one department of East Asian studies.
(MSE)

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Eugene Ching

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Why a Calligraphy Course for Language Students

Eugene Ching

(A paper read at the CLTA/A TFL annual conference held in San Francisco, November 25-26, 1983.)

Professor Ts'ung Chin assigned this topic to me while I was in China last summer, and my wife, who answered the phone, promised him that I would do it. Of course, I would. Who wouldn't publicise the course one is teaching? In order to make this paper unlike the kind of melon Old Wang sold, Old Ching has asked his students and colleagues for help. Quite a few of his students submitted short papers on the subject and many of them along with thier teachers turned in a questionnaire to serve as the basis of a more or less objective study.

First of all, let us see what our customers have to say about a calligraphy course.

Student A: Students from all areas of the university would find studying calligraphy not only educational but also enjoyable. Those students who have no background in Chinese will learn new ways of looking at and thinking about written language. Their appreciation will not be hampered by the meaning of characters. Motion, shading, symetry, style can be appreciated for their own sake. Chinese will, of course, reap even more benefits. In addition to artistic appreciation, a student could improve the quality and symetry of his/her writing. Also, by being acquainted with the different styles a person can read another person's hand writing. ... The biggest benefit I received from studying calligraphy is that it helped me to remember characters.

Student B: The non-native speaker of Chinese must constantly face the task of learning and retaining characters. It seems to me that one of the most beneficial methods of studying and retaining characters is to study Chinese calligraphy. In the process of learning to draw each character the student learns stroke count, character composition, etymology, and artistic balance.

Another important benefit of studying calligraphy is simply the number of characters one is exposed to. Because of the intricate beauty and difficulty of some of the more complex and obscure character's, the student encounters characters that might otherwise be overlooked. Each time a character is drawn the student reinforces the process of retention. Finally, calligraphy enhances the artistic execution of everyday character writing. The thorough exposure to stroke method improves the dexterity with which one writes. The student benefits from the confidence and ease of execution of each character and certainly the reader benefits of artistically written Chinese script.

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Student C: At first thought, there would seem to be little need for a student of the Chinese language to learn calligraphy. Since it is primarily an art form, it would seem to have no direct benefit. But if we consider the relationship of the language and the art of calligraphy in more depth, the advantages become more evident. In contrast to the general attitude in the west, a person's writing quality carries much esteem in China. As one raises his level of education, the way he writes becomes more important. ... On a related and more practical note, the study of calligraphy broadens and increases one's ability to recognize various forms and styles of characters. Any beginning student will attest to their difficulty in first encountering cursive or running style characters after many long hours working only with standard print style. Exposure to various styles not only aids the student in the mechanics and aesthetics of writing but also to readings of many new variations. Of less direct benefit yet still of importance is the place calligraphy holds as a cultural art form. Students often spend time with history, geography, and even the food of China as helps in understanding the context in which the language develops, yet forget calligraphy. There are many reasons why calligraphy ought to be a part of the Chinese language student's overall background. These are simply a few to illustrate the point.

Student D: As a Chinese major, I find myself being almost apologetic about being unable to render calligraphic representations of the characters I read and write everyday. The analogy is that of a man who can read and write printed English, but cannot make heads or tails of the cursive form. The fact that calligraphy is more than an art form is evidenced by the fact it is offered by the department of East Asian languages and literatures and not the art department. Calligraphy is an essential aspect of the complex form of communication known as the Chinese language. And, as an element of Chinese culture, it is as integral to understanding the people as any historical or literary study. But beyond these simplistic practical considerations, the Chinese major should take calligraphy for the same reasons he or she learns how to cook with a wok or tries on a costume or beard from Jingxi - for sheer cultural and artistic pleasure. One's education must first and foremost concentrate on "book-learning," but education is also a joyful experience, and there is no joy quite like artistic expression, as can be achieved through the practice of calligraphy. Thus, for both the purposes of knowledge and self-satisfaction, calligraphy should be a part of the Chinese major's course of study.

Student E: (see attached)

The word calligraphy meant little to me until I took a course about three years ago. I did not have much of an idea what calligraphy really was, much less Chinese calligraphy. I had imagined that all Chinese writing was pretty much the same with little variation in style. Like myself at the time, most Westerners see Chinese as strange, complicated symbols and that they are usually printed in Block style. You also assume that every Chinese writes characters the same way, which is a foolish notion, since we know that each American writes English differently and that we each have our own individual style of writing. Of course, this was three years ago and I am now enlightened!

I discovered that each Chinese calligrapher has his or her own style. Major styles can be classified into running, running grass, and cursive, among others. There are calligraphers who are famous in each of these style categories and others who have a style all their own, such as Mao Tse-tung. He had an intense style of calligraphy which he himself likened as a monk with an umbrella.

The great thing about Chinese calligraphy is that you do not have to be Chinese to appreciate it. In fact, I once ran into a Chinese individual who could not say exactly what a certain Chinese poem said because it was written in the wild and nearly incomprehensible cursive style. The point is, though, that we did not have to understand the exact meaning of the poem in order to be able to appreciate the beautiful writing style. If you have an opportunity to visit a display of Chinese calligraphy at an art gallery, you will see exactly what I mean. Some of the pieces of Chinese calligraphy were incomprehensible to me, but

through the brush strokes of the calligrapher, I was able to get a sense of the feeling he was trying to convey. Broad, forceful brush strokes convey strength and you realize that the characters before you have a specific meaning that the calligrapher really believes in, such as characters like longevity and prosperity. Also, the beauty of the characters by all calligraphers reflect the many years of practice that it takes to have truly unique form. Basically, from the Chinese viewpoint, calligraphy is seen as an art form in itself. This fact is obvious when you visit a Chinese home or establishment and can see decorated on the walls Chinese calligraphy on hanging scrolls or in frames, exhibited the same way Americans would show a beautiful painting.

Finally, with the myth dispelled that only Chinese can appreciate Chinese calligraphy, I also learned after my Chinese calligraphy ~~class~~ that the best part of learning to appreciate Chinese calligraphy is actually doing it yourself. Similarly, you do not have to be Chinese to do Chinese calligraphy. We students began by tracing characters in a beginner's book, exactly the same way young Chinese students first learn how to do calligraphy. After a lot of practice with that (Chinese students spend much more time practicing, of course) we were then able to find examples of Chinese poems and do our own calligraphy in our own styles.

In sum, you do not have to be Chinese to do calligraphy or enjoy it. The greatest part of this art form is that it gives you a sense of satisfaction when you have completed a piece of Chinese calligraphy and can proudly display it in your home.

Summing them up, we can arrive at the following reasons:

1. Calligraphy is not only educational but also enjoyable.
2. Calligraphy will help the student learn to write characters better.
It enhances the artistic execution of everyday character writing.
It improves the dexterity with which one writes.
It increases the student's confidence and ease in writing.
3. Calligraphy will help the student learn to read better, particularly the various cursive forms of writing.
4. Calligraphy is an essential aspect of the complex form of communication known as the Chinese language.
5. As an element of Chinese culture it is as integral to understanding the people as any historical or literary study.
6. A person's hand writing quality carries much esteem in China.
7. It is through calligraphy students learn the stroke count, stroke order, the significance of the different strokes, character composition, etymology, and artistic balance.
8. It could be learned for sheer cultural and artistic pleasure.

Now, let us turn to the survey. Seven statements were presented in the questionnaire distributed to some of our students and faculty members in the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures. For each statement, they were requested to indicate (A) strong agreement, (B) moderate agreement, (C) moderate disagreement, or (D) strong disagreement. Forty people returned the questionnaire. Of the forty, 22 were graduate students, 9 were undergraduate students, and 9 were faculty members. In the following are the seven statements and the responses:

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1. Calligraphy should be an elective course for all Chinese majors.

	Faculty/Students	Total	%	Total Agreement	Total Disagreement
A.	4/15	19	47.5%	70%	25%
B.	2/7	9	22.5%		
C.	1/6	7	17.5%		
D.	1/2	3	7.5%		
O.	1/1	2	5%	(0 for no answer)	

2. Calligraphy should be a required course for all Chinese majors.

A.	1/10	11	27.5%	60%	37.5%
B.	4/9	13	32.5%		
C.	3/6	9	22.5%		
D.	1/5	6	15%		
O.	1		2.5%		

3. Calligraphy will definitely help the student learn to read Chinese better.

A.	2/12	14	35%	70%	27.5%
B.	4/10	14	35%		
C.	1/7	8	20%		
D.	2/1	3	7.5%		
O.	1		2.5%		

4. Calligraphy will definitely help the student learn to write Chinese characters better.

A.	6/24	30	75%	97.5%	2.5%
B.	3/6	9	22.5%		
C.	0/1	1	2.5%		
D.	0/0	0	0%		

5. Since calligraphy is primarily an art form, it is useful only to students who are interested in art.

A.	0/2	2	5%	17.5%
B.	2/3	5	12.5%	

C.	2/9	11	27.5%	
D.	5/16	21	52.5%	80%
O.	1	1	2.5%	

6. Taking calligraphy, a student will learn more about Chinese culture.

A.	4/14	18	45%	
B.	5/15	20	50%	95%
C.	0/1	1	2.5%	
D.	0/0	0	0%	2.5%
O.	1	1	2.5%	

7. Taking calligraphy is a waste of time.

A.	0/0	0	0%	
B.	0/0	0	0%	0%
C.	1/4	5	12.5%	
D.	8/26	34	85%	97.5%
O.	1	1	2.5%	

From this statistical study of the survey, we can see that reasons given before the survey do hold water. It is gratifying to learn that none of the 40 surveyed consider taking calligraphy a waste of time. An overwhelming majority thinks calligraphy will help the student learn more about Chinese culture and to write Chinese characters better. 70% think that calligraphy will even help with the reading of Chinese. The results are indeed encouraging. They show that there are many good reasons why a language student should take calligraphy.